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# buffers

common-sense  
conservation



United States Department of Agriculture

Program Aid 1615



Conservation buffers are a common-sense way for you to protect your most valuable asset – your land – and demonstrate your personal commitment to conservation.

What's more, the continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) sign-up makes the use of conservation buffers economically attractive. You can sign up any day at your local U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center ... without having to make a competitive offer as required during the general CRP sign-up. Your offer will be automatically accepted if all eligibility requirements are met.



Best described as strips or small areas of land in permanent vegetation, conservation buffers help control potential pollutants and manage other environmental concerns. Filter strips, field borders, grassed waterways, field windbreaks, shelterbelts, contour grass strips, and riparian (streamside) buffers are all examples of conservation buffers.

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Conservation buffers can be especially helpful to you in maintaining a productive, profitable, and responsible farming

or ranching operation. America's farms and ranches today produce more than crops and livestock. They also produce environmental benefits, and conservation buffers can help you protect soil, air, and water quality; improve fish and wildlife habitat; and demonstrate a commitment to land stewardship.

Conservation buffers can be used along streams and around lakes or wetlands. They can also be installed at field edges or within fields. Buffers are most effective, of course, if they are planned as part of a comprehensive conservation system.



To maximize their effectiveness and your overall conservation program, buffers should be combined with other proven conservation practices, such as conservation tillage, nutrient management, and integrated pest management. Working together, these practices will provide you with an effective yet profitable conservation program.

This brochure will help you understand what conservation buffers are and how they can be worked into your farming or ranching operation. The brochure will also acquaint you with the USDA programs available to help you install and maintain conservation buffers.



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## riparian buffers

Streamside plantings of trees, shrubs, and grasses that can intercept contaminants from both surface water and ground water before they reach a stream and that help restore damaged streams.



## filter strips

Strips of grass used to intercept or trap field sediment, organics, pesticides, and other potential pollutants before they reach a body of water.



## grassed waterways

Strips of grass seeded in areas of cropland where water concentrates or flows off a field. While they are primarily used to prevent gully erosion, waterways can be combined with filter strips to trap contaminants or field sediment.



## salt-tolerant vegetation

Special areas planted to vegetation capable of growing in high-saline environments and capable of reducing saline seepage.



## **cross-wind trap strips**

Rows of perennial vegetation planted in varying widths and oriented perpendicular to the prevailing wind direction. Cross-wind trap strips can effectively prevent wind erosion in cropping areas with high average annual wind speeds.



## **shallow water areas for wildlife**

Areas of shallow water within or near cropland that are protected by permanent shrubs, trees, and grassed areas. These areas are vital to enhancing wildlife habitat.



## **wellhead protection areas**

Land within a maximum 2,000-foot radius from a public well, as designated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or a State-designated agency, can be enrolled in the continuous CRP sign-up. Circular-shaped areas can be “squared off” to eliminate odd-shaped corners to a maximum of 367 acres.

## **other types of buffers include:**

**Field Borders** — Grass-seeded areas along the edges or ends of cropland.

**Alley Cropping** — Crops planted between rows of larger mature trees.

**Herbaceous Wind Barriers** — Perennial vegetation established in rows across the prevailing wind direction.

**Vegetative Barriers** — Narrow, permanent strips of dense, tall, stiff, erect perennial vegetation established parallel and perpendicular to the dominant slope of the field.

**Streambank Plantings** — Plants, shrubs, and/or trees placed to protect streambanks.

## the value of buffers

Chances are you are already using some form of conservation buffer in your farming or ranching operation. When used as part of a well-planned and properly implemented conservation farming system, buffers can play a big role in your conservation plans.

Buffers slow water runoff, trap sediment, and enhance water infiltration in the buffer itself. They also trap fertilizers, pesticides, bacteria, pathogens, and heavy metals, minimizing the chances of these potential pollutants reaching surface water and ground water sources. Buffers also trap snow and reduce blowing soil in areas with strong winds. They protect livestock from harsh weather, offer a natural habitat for wildlife, and improve fish habitat. Wooded buffers can also provide a source of future income.

Properly installed and well-maintained buffers help diversify the "look" of your farm, adding to its beauty, recreational opportunities, land value, and even air quality. All of these benefits add up to make buffers a visible demonstration of your own personal commitment to common-sense conservation.



## types of buffers

There are many different types of buffers. While these practices may be called different names in different regions of the country, their functions are much the same — improve and protect ground water and surface water quality; reduce erosion on cropland and streambanks; and provide protection and cover for livestock, wildlife, and fish.

## shelterbelts/ field windbreaks

A row or rows of trees, shrubs, or other plants used to reduce wind erosion, protect young crops, and control blowing snow. Shelterbelts also provide excellent protection from the elements for wildlife, livestock, houses, and farm buildings. Field windbreaks are similar to shelterbelts but are located along crop field borders or within the field itself. They may also be called hedgerow plantings in some areas.



## living snow fences

Similar in design to field windbreaks/shelterbelts, living snow fences serve the additional function of being used to help manage snow deposits to protect buildings, roads, and other property. They can be designed and placed to help protect nearby areas for livestock, provide wildlife cover, and collect snow to enhance soil moisture and nearby water supplies.



## contour grass strips

Narrow bands of perennial vegetation established across the slope of a crop field and alternated down the slope with strips of crops. Properly designed and maintained contour grass strips can reduce soil erosion, minimize transport of sediment and other water-borne contaminants, and provide wildlife habitat.



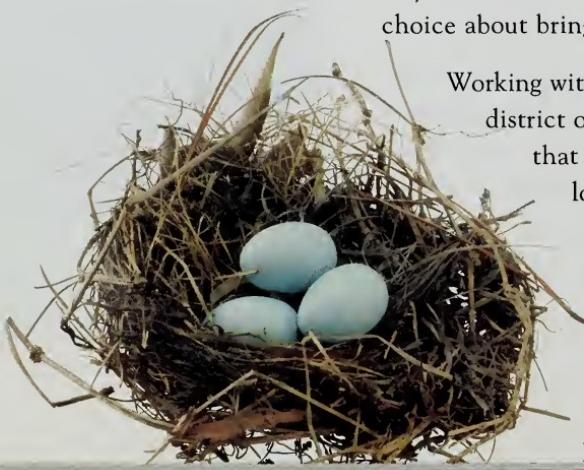


## continuous CRP sign-up

An important new opportunity to help you establish continuous CRP sign-up. This program allows you to establish certain types of pasture and enroll the land in the CRP at any time without losing your CRP contract. If you have land covered by an expiring CRP contract, you have a choice about bringing the land out of CRP. You can:

Working with the staff in your local Natural Resources Conservation Service district office, you identify those buildings and structures that are most suitable for your local Farm Service Agency to remove. The eligibility requirements are:

To be eligible, you must have marginal land enrolled in the CRP. Cropland is eligible if it is not currently being farmed or used as a cultural commodity in 2 of the last 5 years. Marginal land is land capable of being cropped. The land must be in a CRP contract for at least 1 year.



Marginal pasture that is suitable for CRP sign-up must be in a CRP contract for at least 1 year.



Nationwide, the goal is to establish two million miles of conservation buffers by the year 2002.

continuous CRP sign-up

An important new opportunity to help you establish conservation buffers on your farm or ranch is the continuous CRP sign-up. This program allows you to establish certain conservation buffer practices on cropland and marginal pasture and enroll the land in the CRP at any time without having to go through the process of submitting a competitive offer. If you have land covered by an expiring CRP contract, you don't have to make an "all-or-nothing" choice about bringing the land out of CRP. You decide what land to enroll in the program.

Working with the staff in your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or conservation district office, you identify those buffer practices available under the continuous CRP sign-up that are most suitable for your land and meet your needs. You then submit an offer to your local Farm Service Agency office. That offer will be automatically accepted if all eligibility requirements are met.

To be eligible, you must have owned the land for the previous year. Cropland is eligible if it was planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity in 2 of the last 5 crop years and is physically and legally capable of being cropped. The land does not have to be highly erodible.

Marginal pasture that is suitable for use as a riparian buffer is also eligible. Marginal pasture includes any land along streams or rivers that is grazed, whether previously seeded to grass or not. Most land covered by expiring CRP contracts that is determined suitable for a CRP buffer practice is likewise eligible.

It's that simple. Your local USDA Service Center staff will know specifically what technical and financial help is available to help you design and establish buffers, including assistance from State and local programs.

### eligible buffer practices

While not all buffer practices are eligible for the continuous CRP sign-up, many of the more practical and effective buffers can be enrolled. Those buffer practices eligible for the continuous CRP sign-up include:

- \* Riparian Buffers
  - \* Filter Strips
  - \* Grassed Waterways
  - \* Shelterbelts
  - \* Field Windbreaks
  - \* Living Snow Fences
  - \* Contour Grass Strips
  - \* Shallow Water Areas for Wildlife
  - \* Cross-Wind Trap Strips
  - \* Salt-Tolerant Vegetation
  - \* Designated Wellhead Protection Areas

payment rates

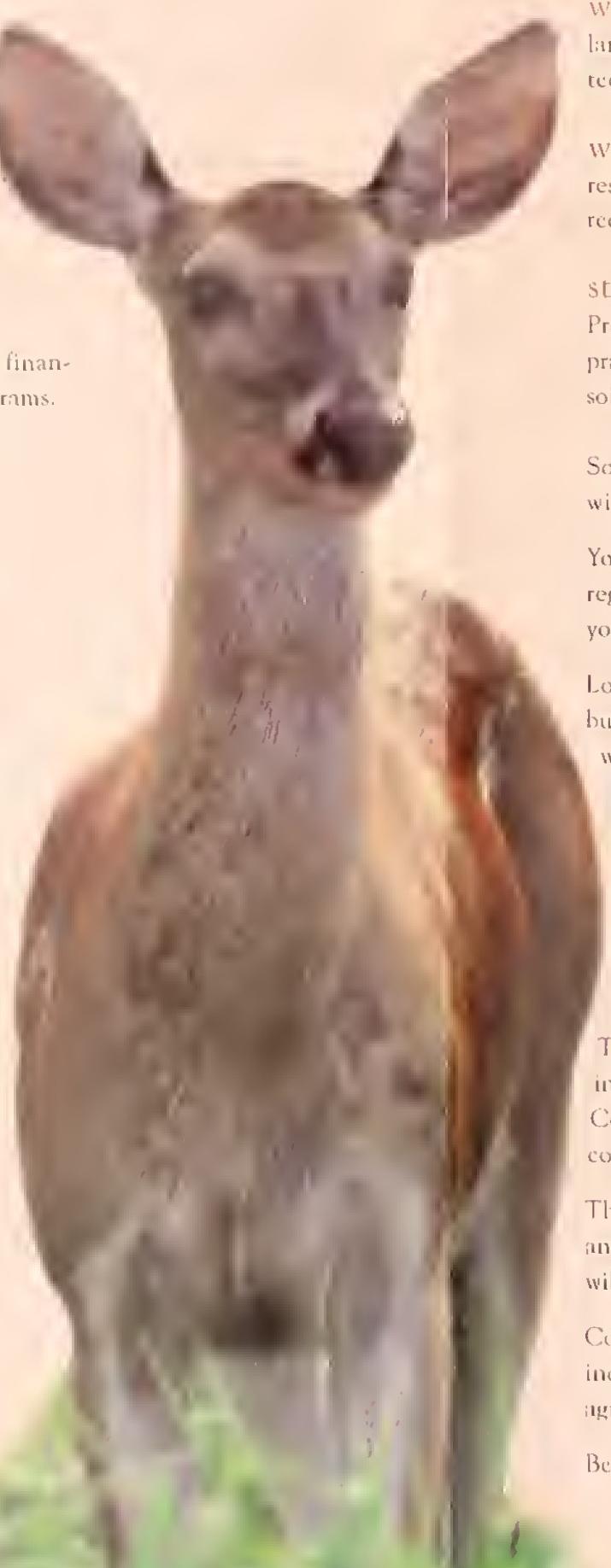
In addition to being common-sense practices, financial incentives make conservation buffers economically attractive. Annual rental payments are based on the relative productivity of the soil type being offered and the average dryland cash rental rate for comparable land in the county.

- A 20 percent incentive is added to the annual rental rate for field windbreaks, grassed waterways, filter strips, and riparian buffers.
- A 10 percent incentive is added to the annual rental rate for land within designated wellhead protection areas.

Cost-sharing payments up to 50 percent of the cost of establishing a permanent cover are provided. Some of the measures eligible for cost sharing include: site preparation, temporary cover until permanent cover is established, grading or shaping, seeds, trees or shrubs, plastic mulch, and supplemental irrigation or fencing.

Contracts under the continuous CRP sign-up are 10 to 15 years in length, depending on the approved practice.

Annual rental payments are made after October 1 each year. Cost-share payments are made when the approved practices are completed.



other programs can help

ther Federal, State, and local government programs also can help with the cost of implementing buffer practices. These include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), and Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP):

environmental quality incentives program (EQIP) — This program provides technical, financial and educational assistance in designated priority areas, with half of the sources targeted to livestock-related natural resource concerns and the remainder setaside for other significant conservation priorities.

wildlife habitat incentives program (WHIP) — This is a voluntary program for landowners who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat on private land. It provides both technical assistance and cost sharing to help establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat.

wetlands reserve program (WRP) — This voluntary program helps landowners store and protect wetlands on private property. It provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal agricultural land.

stewardship incentive program (SIP) — Teamed with the Forest Stewardship program, SIP provides cost sharing for improved management of private forest land through multiple practices, including planning, tree planting, wildlife and fish habitat, recreation, riparian restoration, soil erosion control, and forest improvements.

Some private organizations are making financial assistance available as well, particularly for wildlife habitat enhancements.

Your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office can provide you with more details regarding rental payments, cost-sharing options and other buffer assistance programs available in your area.

Local Extension Service offices can also help you in determining the economics of conservation buffer systems in your operation, while your State forester's office can provide you with advice on what tree and shrub species are appropriate for use in buffer plantings in your area.

Agricultural consultants and representatives of agribusiness firms are another source of information about conservation buffers and the design and use of buffers in comprehensive conservation farm or ranch systems.

an initiative for all of agriculture

The National Conservation Buffer Initiative is a multiyear effort undertaken by USDA. The initiative is led by NRCS, working in cooperation with the Farm Service Agency; Forest Service; Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; State conservation agencies; conservation districts; and numerous other public- and private-sector partners.

The goal of the initiative is to encourage the use of conservation buffers by farmers, ranchers, and other landowners as a means of improving soil, water, and air quality while enhancing fish and wildlife habitat, and adding to the beauty and diversity of farms and ranches across the country.

conservation buffers not only represent profitability and common-sense conservation for individual landowners, but the use of buffers has also drawn the endorsement of many major agricultural companies and leading agricultural and conservation organizations.

because these groups know the importance of sound conservation practices, for individual landowners and the entire economy, they have pledged their organizational support by joining USDA's National Conservation Buffer Team.

For more information on buffers, contact your local USDA Service Center.

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To: